

draft
Salton Sea Ecosystem Restoration
Advisory Committee Activities/Role

4/21/04

Committee Role

Established pursuant to Quantification Settlement Agreement implementing legislation, to advise the Secretary for Resources regarding preparation of the legislatively required study to determine a preferred alternative for restoration of the Salton Sea ecosystem and protection of the wildlife dependent on that ecosystem.

Committee Meetings

Prior meetings:

January 2004 – Background on QSA implementing legislation and Salton Sea setting, prior activities of Salton Sea Authority

February 2004 – Optional bird habitat tour

March 2004 – Initial discussion of ecosystem restoration goals, CEQA process overview, status of Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Plan, wildlife characteristics of hypersaline lakes

This meeting:

April 2004 – Additional programs related to Salton Sea ecosystem restoration (*e.g.* QSA implementation/mitigation), lessons learned in Central Valley & Bay-Delta

Next meeting:

June 2004 – Overview of water/salinity baseline with QSA in place, contextual relationships for Salton Sea avifauna

Key Areas of Advisory Committee Policy Input

Below, listed in the chronological order in which they will be needed for the study, are the priority areas of Committee input.

Development of ecosystem restoration goals/objectives

The goals/objectives establish the basis for the restoration study, and are needed before conceptual development of alternatives begins. This step is before the Committee now.

Some questions to consider regarding development of ecosystem restoration goals include:

What are the ecosystem restoration priorities in this area?

What is likely to be the most cost-effective technical approach for maximizing habitat values for the optimal number of species?

How do ecosystem restoration actions presently being planned or implemented along the Lower Colorado River or in the Colorado River Delta area relate to actions that might be implemented at the Salton Sea?

How do Quantification Settlement Agreement environmental mitigation requirements complement, overlap, or otherwise relate to potential ecosystem restoration actions?

How would implementing restoration actions at the Salton Sea contribute to achieving migratory bird species goals throughout the Pacific Flyway?

What priority should be given to restoration actions that would achieve multiple environmental benefits (*e.g.* constructed wetland habitat that would improve New or Alamo River water quality at the international boundary)?

To what extent are particular bird species now found at the sea uniquely dependent on this location as opposed to other habitat areas?

What are relative goals for species abundance and diversity?

What resources are realistically sustainable over the long-term?

How do the mandates of the California and federal Endangered Species Acts and California's fully protected species statutes fit into ecosystem restoration goals?

Development of ecosystem restoration alternatives

Following synthesis of ecosystem restoration goals/objectives, a range of alternatives must be developed, then screened and evaluated. The timeframe for alternative development is fall 2004. The State does not intend to re-study alternatives previously evaluated in detail in the work performed pursuant to the 1998 federal legislation; the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) provides that this information may be incorporated by reference.

Some questions to consider regarding alternative development/evaluation include:

Is the range of alternatives sufficiently wide to be representative of a range of reasonable outcomes, and to satisfy CEQA requirements?

What level of environmental benefits is provided by each of the alternatives relative to likely incremental costs for achieving additional benefits?

To what extent are the alternatives likely to be readily implemented? Are there substantial differences in the timing of likely implementation among the alternatives?

Are there some actions that are common to all alternatives and could, for CEQA purposes, be evaluated at a project-specific level of analysis concurrently with the programmatic analysis?

To what extent can risk management techniques be incorporated in the alternatives – risks to biological resources, risks of funding not being available at optimum times, risks of unbounded State liability?

How can we develop alternatives that avoid/minimize/mitigate impacts, including impacts to agriculture, air quality, recreation, power generation, and local economies?

To what extent should the State consider implementing actions in the Delta in Mexico?

Development of financing plan

The extent to which restoration actions can be implemented ultimately depends on available funding. Completion of the financing plan occurs in 2006, since information from alternative evaluation is needed to establish a realistic range of potential costs. At this time, it will also be known if there will be any relevant bond measures on the 2006 ballot. Some questions to consider regarding developing a financing plan include:

To what extent could proposed alternatives be implemented in stages or phases, to facilitate their financing?

What range of costs would likely be “reasonable”?

Are there biologically high-priority actions that should be implemented immediately with the monies then available in the restoration fund?

What are the likely odds of a new state bond measure or federal appropriations that might fund a proposed project?

Based on the draft site-specific environmental documentation and permitting work and the likely alternatives, does it appear that the potential IID/DWR/MWD water transfer could be implemented and if so, what would be its net positive financial benefit for the restoration fund?

The QSA implementing legislation directs the State to undertake ecosystem restoration, but most of the land and water resources at the Salton Sea are owned/controlled/managed by the federal government. What is a likely or appropriate level of federal cost-sharing?

Who would operate and maintain a proposed project, and how would O&M be funded?

Recommendations on selection of a preferred alternative

The QSA implementing legislation requires that the Secretary submit a preferred alternative to the Legislature by December 31, 2006.